

# Breastfeeding while coping with drug and alcohol issues

**This leaflet offers advice on breastfeeding safely for anyone with drug and/or alcohol dependency issues.**

Please seek medical advice from your GP, midwife or health visitor if you are breastfeeding and you are concerned that your baby is being exposed to a harmful level of drugs, or you are concerned that your baby may be having withdrawal symptoms because you are reducing your drug use or you are cutting down your breastfeeding.

**If you think your baby is ill due to the effects of drugs you should take your baby to the nearest Accident & Emergency or ring 999 for an ambulance.**

## Introduction

Breastfeeding has many health benefits for you and your baby, but if you take illegal drugs or misuse alcohol you need some extra information to help you decide how to feed your baby safely.

Most illegal drugs will pass into your breast milk and to your baby. The amount that goes into your milk depends on how soon after taking the substance or medication you feed your baby. The effect the drugs have on your baby, both physically and mentally may be the same effects the drugs have on you and can also be life threatening and cause long term harm to your baby. The long-term effects of taking illegal drugs while breastfeeding are still unknown. But if you are using them, talk to your midwife, health visitor or GP – they won't judge you and will be able to help you access the services you need to stop using drugs.

You can also visit the FRANK website <https://www.talktofrank.com/> or call 0300 123 6600 for supportive and confidential drugs advice. The helpline is available 24 hours a day.

## Side effects on breast milk from substance misuse

All drugs become poisonous in high enough doses, below we have explained the effect some common drugs may have on you and your breastfed baby:

- Methadone is an opioid (opium-type) drug. It does reach the breast milk in small quantities. The paediatricians (doctor specialising in the care of children) in this unit support breastfeeding with any dose of methadone. Recent research suggests that breastfeeding may reduce the risk of the baby having withdrawal symptoms from methadone.
- Subutex (Buprenorphine) has not been found to be a problem for breastfeeding babies.
- Heroin is an opium-based drug and a sedative that depresses the central nervous system and can cause your baby to have problems with breathing. As well as the risks with sedatives, heroin usually has other unknown substances mixed with it which may be extremely hazardous to you and your baby.

- Cocaine/crack is a stimulant and vaso-constrictor (narrows blood vessels and reduces blood flow to the organs and tissues of the body). Cocaine and crack have a toxic effect and can cause your baby to cry and be irritable, can affect their feeding, causing vomiting and diarrhoea and most importantly, cause the baby to be seriously unwell. It has caused many adult deaths.
- Cannabis this contains a substance called tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), which causes a 'high' but can also lead to problematic side effects. These include drowsiness, nausea and mental health issues, such as anxiety, paranoia and psychosis. Most cannabis found on the UK market has a very high level of THC. This makes it much stronger than the cannabis used in the past. THC is known to cross the placenta and may affect your unborn baby's development. Your baby is at increased risk of:
  - Being born prematurely.
  - Being born with a low birthweight.
  - Learning, behavioural and mental health issues as they grow up, including substance misuse. For further information see also [https://www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk/media/e2vneb4i/cannabis-use-in-pregnancy\\_a-parents-guide\\_may21.pdf](https://www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk/media/e2vneb4i/cannabis-use-in-pregnancy_a-parents-guide_may21.pdf)
- Alcohol passes into breast milk reaching similar levels to your own blood alcohol level. Drinking more than 2 units a day will make your baby drowsy and can affect development or make your baby very unwell. The level of alcohol peaks between 30-90 minutes after a drink, so it is better to avoid breastfeeding for 2-3 hours after drinking. There is no need to express then discard breast milk after drinking, as when your blood alcohol level falls it will fall in the breast milk also.
- Binge drinking, where you have more than 6 units of alcohol in a single drinking session, may make you less aware of your baby's needs. If you do binge drink, your baby should be cared for by an adult who has not had any alcohol. The adult caring for your baby should ensure your baby is fed responsively with either previously expressed breastmilk, or formula milk. This will ensure your baby is not exposed to the alcohol present in your breast milk at the time of binge drinking and will ensure your baby is fed safely. You may want to express and discard for comfort and to maintain your milk supply. See <https://www.breastfeedingnetwork.org.uk/alcohol/>
- Other drugs, such as ecstasy, ketamine etc, often contain stimulants. There is little information about their effects on breastfeeding but stimulants are known to be hazardous to babies.

When you buy 'street' drugs from dealers – regardless of whether you know them well, or even 'friends of friends' you have no guarantee of the contents of those drugs or what they may have been cut with, so it is impossible to tell if any of them are what you believe them to be. However, the benefits of breastfeeding may still outweigh these risks which is why it is important to know the facts.

If you take drugs other than those you have told us about, they may be harmful or even life-threatening for your baby, so please let us know, we will not judge, but will help you.

Never give any prescribed drugs, illegal drugs or alcohol to babies or children. Any drugs should be stored safely out of reach. If you are on a methadone or Subutex regime a lockable storage box may be available for you free of charge.

## **Sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS)**

If you've been drinking, or using drugs, never co-sleep with your baby. There is a strong link between sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) and alcohol. If you know that you're going to have a few drinks, arrange for another (sober) adult to look after your baby. Follow this advice if you are under the influence of mood altering drugs. Find out more at

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/sudden-infant-death-syndrome-sids/>

## **Further information**

- <https://www.laleche.org.uk/alcohol-and-breastfeeding/>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/start4life/baby/feeding-your-baby/breastfeeding/can-i-breastfeed-if-im/drinking-alcohol/#anchor-tabs>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/start4life/baby/feeding-your-baby/breastfeeding/can-i-breastfeed-if-im/taking-illegal-drugs/>
- <https://www.breastfeedingnetwork.org.uk/drugs-factsheets/>
- <https://www.lullabytrust.org.uk/safer-sleep-advice/smoking/>

**Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.**

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